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AUTHOR	Munoz, Marco A.
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ABSTRACT

The Truancy Court Diversion Project was developed in one Kentucky county to address the need for alternative methods of handling student truancy among high-risk children. This judicially driven, school- and home-based project serves schools that have not met targeted district attendance goals. Students are targeted for participation if they have 15-25 absences and their parents are willing to discuss family issues in an open forum. Some of the program's activities include parenting classes, Saturday school, behavior contracts, drug screening, tutoring, psychological assessments, anger management, referrals to other programs and services, programs on substance abuse and domestic violence, and violence-abatement classes. A judge provides personal, caring, and supportive interaction with the families. Study participants were 45 out of 111 elementary students (predominantly white, female, and poor). At baseline, during, and after the program, data were collected on individual student characteristics and attendance. Parents completed surveys on their satisfaction with the program, and teachers completed surveys on program issues. Results indicated that the program was being implemented as designed, major stakeholders were satisfied with the program, and positive changes were occurring based on numbers of student absences. (Contains 16 references.) (SM)

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Whatever it Takes: The Impact of a Truancy Program on Attendance

Marco A. Munoz

Evaluation Specialist

VanHoose Educational Center

3332 Newburg Road

Lousville, KY 40218

Tel. (502) 485-6348

Fax: (502) 485-6255

Mmunoz2@jefferson.k12.ky.us

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Abstract

Children in poverty face complex factors that have the general effect of severely restraining the students' potential to learn. The Truancy Court Diversion Project (TCDP) is an effort to address the need for developing alternative methods for attacking the growing problem of truancy in a large urban school district. Participants were elementary school students (N = 40). Paired-sample t-tests were used to conduct the statistical analyses. Findings indicated that the truancy program is making a difference on attendance measures. Implications for policy, practice, and further research are discussed.

Key words: Truancy, K-12 Education, At-Risk Students

Whatever it takes: The Impact of a Truancy Program on Attendance

Socio-economic conditions of the students continue to be a major determinant of school performance in school systems across the nation, especially in high poverty urban school districts (Lippman, Burns, and McArthur, 1996; Roeder, 1999; Munoz & Dossett, 2001). Children in poverty face complex factors that have the general effect of severely restraining the students potential to learn (Cardenas & McCarty, 1985; Legters & Slavin, 1992).

Significant policy changes have been recommended by sociologist and political scientists in education to face this critical issue. Interventions attempting to provide equal opportunities in education and addressing social barriers toward successful learning constitute a research topic that occupies center stage in the educational policy arena.

The issue is that most educationally advantaged students receive several times more education-relevant resources than most educationally disadvantaged students: most of this resource advantage is due to variations in family resources rather than school resources (Miller, 1995, p. 94). The author discusses five categories of capital, namely human capital, social capital, health capital, financial capital, and polity capital, which are necessary for a child to be academically successful in the education arena. For instance, in terms of social capital, the child

benefits when adults, with whom the children have a close relationship, take a strong interest in their education. In this sense, the school resources are just one side of the coin: the family resources or lack of are the other side of the coin.

Seeley (1985) proposed the creation of partnerships that combines state educational goals with private local companies, neighborhoods and communities' interest in developing the human capital of the future. The involvement of the business community and neighborhoods are essential in any school reform effort. Businesses are interested in the availability of a skilled workforce that schools might provide. Schools need to engage in collaboration to broaden the social services to meet student needs, which in turn, are prerequisites for achievement. Schools must constantly develop partnerships to create environments, both inside and outside of the school, which enables engagement in learning. Social prevention and academic preparation are complementary: promoting student development is a central element in educational reform strategies. Schools need to become environments that are conducive to students overall development (Pittman & Wright, 1991).

According to Murphy (1991), efforts should be made to expand the "school community," to unite parents, professional educators, businesses, universities, foundations, and the general populace into a collective force dedicated to the improvement of schooling for all

children. For example, policies and programs cannot concentrate solely on the child, but most simultaneously address the needs of two generations -the parent and the child—for they are interdependent.

Program Description

The school district under study is the 26th largest school district in the United States. The school district serves more than 96,000 students from preschool to grade 12. The school district has a vision for long-term student achievement. The vision of the district was designed to assure that every student will acquire the fundamental academic and life skills necessary for success in the classroom and workplace. The district's vision commits the school system to educate each student to the highest academic standards while ensuring attention to non-cognitive measures such as attendance and truancy.

The Kentucky Revised Statue 159.150 and 159.990 provides the legal foundation to efforts with the objective of minimizing the problem of truancy in schools. According to the Kentucky Revised Statue 159.150, any child who has been absent from school without a valid excuse for more than three (3) days, or tardy for more than three (3) days, it is considered a truant. In addition, if a child has been reported truant more than three (3) times, it is considered a habitual or chronic truant.

In addition, according to the Kentucky Revised Statue 159.990, any parent, guardian, or custodian who

intentionally fails to comply with the requirements of the law will be fined; also, subsequent offenses will be classified as a Class B misdemeanor.

The Truancy Court Diversion Project (TCDP) is an effort to address the need for developing alternative methods for attacking the growing problem of truancy in the school district under study. The origin of the project goes back to 1996, when the program was conceived by county school officials and by the Family Court Judge. The TCDP is now in its fourth year of operation. The vision statement of the TCDP synthesizes the essential components of this comprehensive project. The vision statement calls for a community, multi-agency effort to surround and support our most fragile children while removing barriers to school success. This judicially driven initiative strives to create a safety net so tight woven that no child can slip through. It is a multi-agency project that faces the challenge of developing each child to the fullest.

The TCDP is a school-based, home-based project. Not every school in the District has the opportunity to participate in the program. The TCDP has specific criteria for locating the program at the schools. The priority is to serve schools who have not met the targeted district attendance goal. The attendance goal is 95.5% at the elementary level and 94% at the middle school level. Other important criteria are the willingness of the school to enter into a memorandum of agreement, judge's availability,

family advocate availability, and financial resources availability. The judges provide personal, caring, and supportive interaction with the families. They meet for approximately 10 to 12 weeks per semester.

The majority of the schools participating in the program are elementary schools. The participating elementary schools are nine. In addition, three middle schools and one high school are also participating in the program.

The student selection criteria require the family not be active in the Child Protective Services (CPS) or the child not be a probated delinquent. To participate, students need to classify under the definition of truancy stated by Kentucky School Laws. Students will be targeted for participation if they have 15-25 absences and if their parents are willing to discuss family issues in an open forum. However, other students might be considered on an individual basis. The approximate number of students participating in the program will be between 10 to 20 per school.

The program include multiple activities to ensure it's impact on the students attendance. A list of some of the interventions to address truancy problems is listed below:

- Parenting Classes
- Saturday School
- Behavior Contracts
- Drug Screening Of Children

- Tutoring
- Psychological Assessments
- Anger Management
- Referrals To Other Community-Based Support Services
- Referrals To Programs Offered Through Family Resource And Youth Service Centers (Frycs)
- Programs Relating To Issues Of Substance Abuse And Domestic Violence
- Violence-Abatement Classes

Evaluation Objectives and Questions

The evaluation objectives were to conduct an implementation evaluation, a process evaluation, and an outcome evaluation of the program. Implementation evaluation is basically a discrepancy analysis designed to compare or contrast the planned activities against the actual operation of the program. Process evaluation will help to understand the program dynamics by receiving input from critical stakeholders (i.e., teachers and parents) and to provide timely quality assurance guidance to the program coordinator. Outcome evaluation will help to assess the impact of the program on participants.

Attention will be focused on methods to document the evolution of the program from its inception through completion. For this reason, data collection forms were developed between the project coordinator and the program

evaluator. The overarching evaluation questions that will guide the study are the following:

- Implementation Evaluation: Is the program implemented as designed? What are the characteristics of the students participating in the program?
- Progress Evaluation: What are teachers' perceptions to the program? What are the parents' perceptions to the program?
- Outcome Evaluation: Are there differences in participating students in non-academic measures?

Evaluation Framework for the TCDP Study

The Management-Oriented Evaluation Approach

Daniel Stufflebeam (1983) is one of the most reputed leaders on the management-oriented approach. According to Stufflebeam, the evaluation is a process of delineating, obtaining, and providing useful information for judging decision alternatives. The Context, Input, Process, and Product (CIPP) Evaluation has different objectives, methods, and relation to decision making in the change process depending on the type of evaluation emphasis. The JCPS education leaders have to satisfy their informational needs to make decisions.

> The management-oriented rationale is that the evaluative information is an essential part of good decision-making and that the evaluator can be most effective by serving administrators, policy makers,

boards, practitioners, and others who need good evaluative information (Worthen et al., 1997, p. 97).

Implementation evaluation, progress evaluation and outcome evaluation of Klein, Fenstermacher, and Alkin (1971) model will be combined in the program design, analysis, and reporting. Implementation evaluation might prove useful because the evaluator will determine the reasons for any discrepancies between planned and actual operation of the program. Progress evaluation will examine the extent to which the program goals are being achieved. Outcome evaluation will provide information that might be later used to make improvement decisions regarding the program.

Methodology

Participants

The project is currently serving 111 students drawn from eight elementary schools. A total of 26 students are being served at the middle school level and a total of 15 students are being served at the high school level. The grand total of participants is 152 students across the three school levels. The focus of this evaluation is on elementary school since they constitute the majority of the participants (73%).

A random selection of 45 students from a pool of 111 students participating in the program was developed following standard research procedures (Gall, Borg, and Gall, 1996). The random procedure was accomplished with the purpose of analyzing the data with inferential statistical

methodologies (i.e., dependent-sample t-test) with the data coming from this random group of participants.

As shown in Table 1, the randomly selected participants of the TCDP were two-thirds White (66%) and female (66%). More than 90% of the randomly selected participants were on a free (87%) or reduced (4%) lunch status. The lunch status is an indicator of the socio-economic condition of the participants. In this case, it is clearly that the students participating in the TCDP are part of the lower socio-economic status.

As observed in Table 1, all elementary grade levels were well represented in the randomly selected sample. The majority of the randomly selected participants were first graders (24%), followed by second graders (18%) and fourth graders (16%). It is important to notice that 11% of the randomly selected students being served by the program were Exceptional Child (ECE).

Table 1

Characteristics of Students Participating in the Truancy Court Diversion Project (N = 45)

Variable	Number	Percent
Race		
Black	20	44%
White	25	66%
Gender		
Female	25	66%
Male	20	44%
Lunch Status		
Free	39	87%
Reduced	2	4%
Pay	4	9%
Grade Level		
Kindergarten	5	11%
Exceptional Child (ECE)	5	11%
First Grade	11	24%
Second Grade	8	18%
Third Grade	5	11%
Fourth Grade	7	16%
Fifth Grade	4	9%

Data Collection

The data collected focused on the goal of the program: non-academic measures (i.e., attendance). The information was collected at the beginning (baseline information), during, and at the end of the program implementation. The project coordinator and the evaluator used different data sources to obtain the information. First, the computerized database of the District and each of the service providers facilitated individual student data, including identification number, race, gender, lunch status, grade, and attendance measurements. Second, randomly selected parents participated in a survey that measured their satisfaction with the program and provided opportunities to make suggestions for program improvement. Finally, randomly selected teachers participated in a survey that intended to receive input about issues related to the program.

Data Analysis

The project coordinator works with the program evaluator to collect, analyze, and disseminate the information on program operations and outcomes. The evaluation design is pre- and post-measurement using reflexive controls (Rossi, & Freeman, 1993). The data analysis will include descriptive statistics (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996), and dependent-sample t-test (Hinkle, Wiersma, & Jurs, 1994). The evaluation results will be converted to a power point presentation and used to promote support for the program in the school and community.

Results

Implementation Evaluation

The TCDP Implementation evaluation showed that the program was implemented with the basic components as designed while adjusting to the particular needs of each of the eleven schools served by the program.

The program implemented the multiple activities designed in a staff retreat before the school year started, including interventions such as counseling, extra-curricular activities, tutoring, services through the Family Resource Centers, and community services in general (e.g., referrals to other community-based support services). Activity logs showed all the multiple activities performed by the service providers with the main objective of addressing truancy issues in the most needy schools. As usual in educational settings, there were multiple adjustments required to adjust the program to meet the very particular needs of the schools.

Process Evaluation: Teachers

Teachers have first-hand contact with the students. The role of the teachers is a component of truancy-related issues at schools, especially at the elementary school level. Teachers are like second parents to the students. For that reason, one of the main objectives of the process evaluation was to receive input from the teachers about the students participating in the program through a survey instrument. The overall research question in the progress

evaluation of teachers' was: What are the teachers' perceptions to the student after one month in the program?

Table 2 displays the results of the teachers' survey. In the majority of the items, the randomly selected teachers were above the mid-point of the three-point Likert-type scales (1 = no, 3 = yes). Overall, teachers expressed that have been in contact with the parents ($\underline{M}$ = 2.5); however, teachers perception about parental support of school/education is slightly lower, but still above the mid-point on the scale ($\underline{M}$ = 2.1). It must be noticed that some items were reversed scores (i.e., item three, four, eight, and ten) to address reliability issues.

A reliability analysis was conducted to assure that teachers' perceptions were consistent across all items. Item 11 was deleted to increase the reliability of the instrument from .70 to .73.

Table 2

Teachers' Survey Results (N = 34)

	Research Items	Mean	SD
1	I have been in contact with the parent	2.53	0.86
2	Child is prepared for school	2.47	0.61
3	Child appears tired	2.53	0.61
4	Personal hygiene is an issue (not lice related)	2.47	0.79
5	Homework is completed	2.24	0.65
6	Classroom behavior is acceptable	2.29	0.58
7	Child is well liked by classmates	2.59	0.70
8	Child seems shy and difficult to reach	2.41	0.61
9	Child shows interest in schoolwork	2.06	0.81
10	Child is capable but exhibits little effort	2.29	0.84
11	Parent seems supportive of school/education	2.12	0.84

Note: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Analysis = .73

According to standards in educational research, a Cronbach alpha or coefficient of internal consistency around .73 is considered good (Gall, Borg, and Gall, 1996).

Process Evaluation: Parents

The role of the parents and parental involvement in truancy-related issues at schools, especially at the elementary school level, cannot be stressed enough. Across multiple studies, there has emerged a strong conclusion that parental involvement in child and adolescent education generally benefits the children's learning and school success (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). For that reason, one of the main objectives of the process evaluation was to receive input from the parents through a survey instrument. The overall research question in the progress evaluation of parents' attitudes was: What are the parents' perceptions to the TCDP and the school?

Table 3 displays the results of the parents' survey. In the majority of the items, parents were above the mid-point of the five-point Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Overall, parents showed satisfaction with the program and the school climate.

Table 3

Parents' Survey Results (N = 40)

	Research Items	Mean	SD
1	My child likes school	3.69	1.20
2	School treats my child fairly	4.02	0.98
3	School staff is helpful/friendly	4.33	0.72
4	This school is a safe place	4.21	0.95
5	My child is making good progress here	3.92	0.78
6	My child only misses school when ill	3.61	1.25
7	Headlice is/has been a problem	2.45	1.74
8	I believe school staff cares about my child	4.31	1.08
9	I believe this is a good school	4.34	1.02
10	School staff is respectful of me, as parent	4.33	1.19

Note: Cronbach's Alpha Reliability Analysis = .90

Outcome Evaluation

The overall research question for the outcome evaluation dimension was the following: Are there differences in participating students in non-academic measures when compared to previous year pupil month attendance? For conducting this analysis, the randomly selected group was evaluated in terms of their attendance in the first pupil month of the 1999-2000 school year and the first pupil month of the 2000-2001 school year. The objective of the analysis was to assess the impact of the program after one pupil month in terms of number of days absent.

Table 4 shows the results of the dependent-sample t-test. A statistically significant difference was found between a comparison of the past year first pupil month attendance and the current year first pupil month of attendance by the students participating in the program.

Table 4

Paired-Sample T-Test on Days Absents After One Pupil Month Intervention (N = 40)

Measurement	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value
Pre-test (1999-2000)	3.05	1.19	2.28*
Post-test (2000-2001)	2.32	2.03	

$p < .05$

Table 5 displays the result of the dependent-sample t-test but using attendance percentage as the impact measure. Attendance percent was computed using the following formula:

[(m - a) / m] x 100

Membership (m) for the first three months of the school year minus attendance (a) for the first three months of the school year divided by membership (m) for the year; then, the result of the aforementioned operation is multiplied times 100 to obtain the attendance expressed on percentages.

Table 5

Paired-Sample T-Test on Attendance Percentage After Three Pupil Months Intervention (N = 40)

Measurement	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value
Pre-test (1999-2000)	88.99	9.24	2.59*
Post-test (2000-2001)	93.34	5.32	

$p < .01$

Note: five participants were excluded from this analysis because there was no previous attendance records (i.e., Kindergarten students).

Discussion

The findings of this three-level evaluation shows that the TCDP is being implemented as designed, showing satisfaction from major stakeholders (i.e., parents), and expressing changes in days absent by the participating students. The results showed that the program is serving the most needy students not only in terms of attendance but in socio-economic status measured as participation on free/reduced lunch. In addition, the program is serving across grade levels.

The first outcome analysis, after only one month of having the intervention in place at local elementary schools of the District under examination, the mean number of days absent is lower this year pupil month when compared to last year pupil month. This analysis showed a 24% decrease in days absent by the participating students. A statistically significant difference at the alpha level of .05 was found when the same students were compared before and after the intervention.

A second and final outcome analysis, after three pupil months, was performed using the percent of attendance of the students when compared to the previous year three pupil months. This showed a 4.36 difference of improvement by the participating students. A statistically significant difference at the alpha level of .01 was found when an adjustment was made using the formula commonly used for calculating students' attendance percentage.

The general conclusion is that the results were promising across the three levels of evaluation: implementation, progress, and outcome. Furthermore, it might be hypothesized that the longer the intervention, the higher levels of impact of this kind of program on the schools in the county.

In this regard, a year-to-year comparison is recommended by the evaluator upon the completion of the school year with the same randomly selected students that participated in this research. Another recommendations for further research include the possibility of having other measures incorporated in the analysis such as student surveys measuring attitudes toward education (e.g., school in general and attendance in particular). In this case, it can be hypothesized that the happier the students are in their school, the more motivation and eagerness to attend and not miss classes.

We all know from practical experience and by current research that students who miss classes can become truant. Then, they become potential dropouts. Programs such as the TCDP is a multi-agency effort to prevent truancy, foster resiliency, and promote more productive citizens through education (Miller, 1995; Murphy, 1991; Pittman & Wright, 1991; Seeley, 1985). By having students in their classroom, we are enabling students to acquire the fundamental academic and life skills necessary for success in the workplace.

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